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SUBJECT: TAIGA NATIVE VILLAGE KRASNIY YAR: EVERY DAY IS A CRISIS

11. (U) Summary. In the 1930's Stalin relocated many indigenous minorities of Primorye and Khabarovskiy Krai to remote northern areas. One such town is Krasniy Yar. The remote town is an eleven hour drive from Vladivostok, the last four hours over a rough snow road (zimniki) cut through the woods. CG and Pol FSN traveled to Krasniy Yar on December 10-12 and stayed with an indigenous family from the "Udege" minority. End Summary.

A PEOPLE IN THE "RED BOOK"

12. (U) The Udege people share the village of Krasniy Yar with members of the Nenets, Chukchi, and Orochi indigenous people. Traditionally, the Udege were hunters, but they were also co-opted into growing opium for the Chinese as well as gathering ginseng. They are included in the "Red Book" of indigenous people of Russia, numbering about 2,000 total throughout the Far East. In the "Peoples of the Red Book" publication it is noted that "Udege habitats were incorporated into Russia in 1860, but for a long time the real rulers were the Chinese traders of furs and ginseng, to whom many Udeghes were hopelessly indebted. Russian peasants began to settle in the Ussuri region sometime after 1883, but this colonization did not much concern the Udeges, who roamed deep in the forests. On the contrary, according to the observations of many travellers of that time, the Udeges' attitude towards the Russians was remarkably friendly, since the Russians displaced the exploitative Chinese traders. The Russian influence on Udege folk culture was also less than that on other Amur peoples. The women's folk costume, as well as the men's hunting garb and equipment, were relatively well preserved."

THE SNOW ROAD LINKS VILLAGE TO THE OUTSIDE

13. (U) Only one village separates Krasniy Yar from Luchegorsk, the nearest town at the end of the snow road 100 kilometers to the south. Local residents remember well when the town was only accessible by helicopter. With the snow road open in winter they have access to goods and a means to communicate with the outside world; however, the small village faces a host of problems, some brought on by the road itself. Along with poachers and city dwellers who deplete taiga resources in summer, the road has brought forest fires and trash. The unpaved road is also used in summer, but after spring rains it becomes nearly impassable for weeks at a time. The Rayon Administration, located in Luchegorsk, is responsible for road maintenance, but locals say the administration does a poor job of it. The village itself maintains some twenty to thirty kilometers of the road using its own resources, but cannot maintain the entire 100 kilometer stretch.

14. (U) On the way to Krasniy Yar we passed perhaps a half a dozen other cars and several Kamaz trucks hauling logs using double trailers. There is enough traffic from the outside world to support eight small shops in the village. The store we visited had room for a maximum of four shoppers at a time. While Krasniy Yar's residents have access to satellite television and exotic tropical fruit juices in their shops, there is no internet and no cell phone service. The once-a-week bus to Luchegorsk is the only means for Krasniy Yar residents to receive advanced medical attention in rayon polyclinics. Workers in the tiny, three-bed, Krasniy Yar medical clinic were

last paid in August, four months ago, and medical care is extremely basic.

HUNTING, POACHING AND HANDICRAFTS KEEP VILLAGE ALIVE

15. (U) There are few private vehicles, though many residents own Buran or "Blizzard" snowmobiles, which cost over five thousand USD. A snowmobile is more important for most residents since the taiga is the source of life. We were shown sable and squirrel pelts as well as handicrafts using local furs and wood. Pelts these days fetch precious little, with the sable pelts, about the size of a catcher's mitt, selling for only 40 or 50 USD and the squirrel for only fifty cents to a dollar a pelt. Tiger bones and skins as well as bear paws are sold to the Chinese by poachers, but that was one subject that was not discussed openly in detail by locals.

16. (U) To supplement the local economy, USAID has provided seed money for the handicraft business. Some local women are finding a market for their hand sewn native souvenirs in Japan. Vladimir Shirko, chair of the local community, described the USAID project as the first program to have a real impact on the community. Even with the USAID support though, one local woman said the town was dying.

TIMBER AND TIGERS OFF LIMITS TO LOCALS

17. (U) Krasniy Yar is surrounded by birch, cedar, and pine forest, but residents are prohibited from logging nearby. To obtain firewood they are required to seek a permit 20 kilometers away and log in a forest there, rather than in the surrounding woods, which belongs to the "Tierney Les" logging concern. One huge downed tree log might last a week as firewood for a local home during winter. During this visit, the temperature was minus 37C. Even with the cold, local residents believe winters are generally getting warmer, disrupting hunting patterns and disturbing the local ecosystem. There are still tigers, bears, and wild pigs in the forest. Residents consider it a "sin" however to kill a tiger, saying the hunter who does kill a tiger will soon die himself.

HOMESTAY HIGHLIGHTS PROBLEMS FOR INDIGENOUS VILLAGERS

18. (U) Shirko was open and direct about the town's challenges. Although ethnically Ukrainian, he is a strong supporter of preserving Udege culture and language. He said Krasniy Yar has a population of 650 "on average," compared with some 800 people in Soviet times. He said that for most residents, life has become increasingly difficult. While the rich natural beauty of the area is evident, our hosts complained that they could not actively attract tourists because they needed a federal permit, which has not been issued. Shirko is hoping to preserve the hunter lifestyle of the Udege and other native people, but he sees deforestation from big timber operations as a real threat. The language is also dying out, and very few families speak the Udege language at home.

19. (U) The local community, headed by Shirko, does its best to support residents, especially pensioners, by providing meat and other food products as well as firewood in winter. The community has built 14 new wooden houses for locals during last ten years. Shirko said that the community manages to purchase fuel for the town's ancient generator, which supplies the town with electrical power 20 hours per day.

110. (U) The town's biggest scandal is the state of its eighty million ruble new schoolhouse. The schoolhouse was built just two years ago by an outside contractor and already the roof leaks and light fixtures have come crashing down in classrooms. The school briefly had internet access but could not pay the bills. Shirko is considering taking the contractor to court to force the contractor to renovate the building. He is also considering court action to preserve the local forest from industrial timber operations as planned by the Tierny Les company and other logging companies.

NEITHER CULTURAL REVIVAL NOR ASSIMILATION WORKING WELL

¶11. (U) The town is also hoping to resurrect more Udege and other native cultures but the "Dom Kulturi" closed 20 years ago and the school director has elected not to include native language in the curriculum. Given that there are no teachers for chemistry, biology, mathematics, or English, it is perhaps understandable that teachers are focusing solely on the other two of the three "R's." Shirko lamented the school's decision, saying "no language, no culture" although the school did put on a display of traditional dance for the Consulate visitors.

¶12. (U) The other controversial issue was whether to allow an orthodox church to open in Krasniy Yar. According to locals, the church sent "a drunk" who failed to impress the local population. The church was given a registration permit, but there has been no progress towards building a church as the local population made it clear that the pastor was not welcome.

¶13. (U) Vladimir Shirko is nostalgic for the Soviet days when "they didn't touch our woods and the river was healthy." Now, fishermen come from Khabarovsk in the summer and take hundreds of kilos of fish, leaving few fish for the locals. Vladimir said that thirty years ago no one froze to death, no one went hungry and there was education and medical care for everyone. Thirty percent of town residents are pensioners. The oldest resident is 87. He spoke a mix of Udege and Russian and appeared to be in good health when we met him in the local shop.

¶14. (U) Two small towns close by Krasniy Yar were Soviet logging settlements. Since 'perestroika', their residents have been jobless, and survive mainly by poaching. Few of their residents have the resources to move to another town for work.

CHINA CONNECTION STILL STRONG

¶15. (U) Most goods come from China, including fruits, vegetables and clothing, but locals still find many of their needs met from hunting, fishing, and local gardens. At our host family home the dinner included wild mushrooms and fern from the forest, and jam made from strawberries from their own garden. The home was warm, but there was no running water and the outhouse was as basic as it could be.

GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS?

¶16. (U) Residents say they don't exactly feel forgotten. They have made their case to federal and kray authorities for better medical care, protection for and access to the local forest, and money to renovate the school. But the answers they get from central authorities are discouraging. They feel discriminated against and are desperate for solutions. That they discussed their problems so openly with foreigners making a brief visit shows how determined they are to make their case to anyone willing to listen. But there problems are complicated and date back a long time. In the school lobby there are portraits of various Russian leaders. President Medvedev has the most prominent portrait, but nearby is a portrait of Stalin, the "founder" of Krasniy Yar.

¶17. (U) We wondered if the town's overwhelming local problems were compounded by global issues. Town Chief Vladimir Shirko was asked if the tiny settlement was at all feeling the effects of the global economic crisis. He laughed and said that in Krasniy Yar, every day is a crisis. At the very least, the town has a committed public servant trying to find ways for the town to survive.

AMBRUSTER